

ON THE OCCASION OF THE 500TH ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE FOUNDATION OF VERACRUZ (1519-2019)

# YANGA

**AN OPERA**  
**ON THE FIRST STRUGGLE FOR LIBERTY**  
**ON THE AMERICAN CONTINENT**

**GABRIELA ORTIZ**  
**COMPOSER**



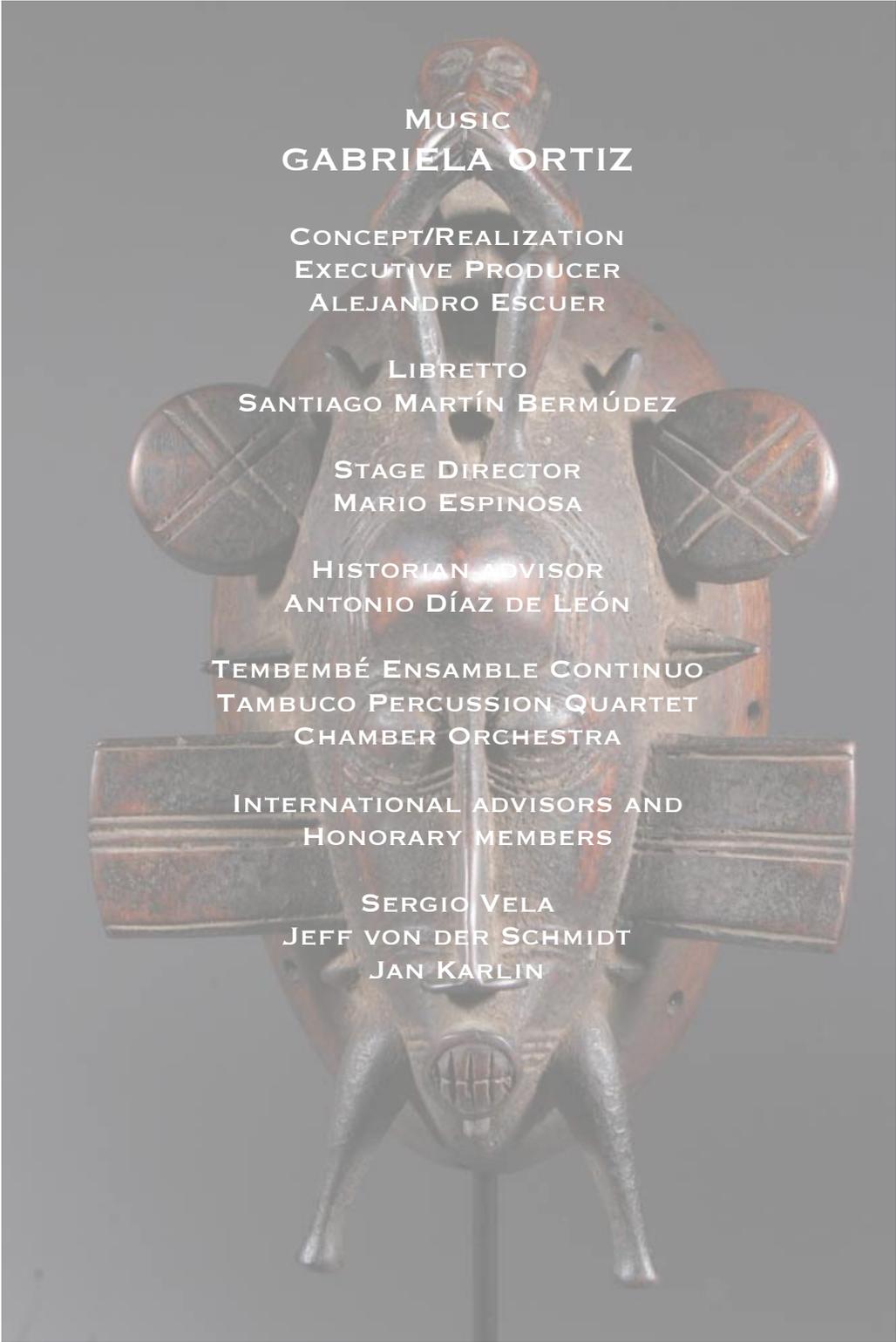
**FROM PRINCE TO SLAVE TO A FIGHTER FOR FREEDOM**

**XVI CENTURY AFRICA-SPAIN-VERACRUZ MEXICO**

**YANGA** is based on the life and legacy of the African Prince **Gaspar Yanga**, who was captured and brought to Mexico in 1545 as a slave. A member of the royal family of Gabon at the time, Yanga became the chieftain of a band of slaves who sought to find freedom in a town of Veracruz around 1570. He lived for over 30 years as a fugitive, and as such he fought and negotiated to build a free colony of America, *San Lorenzo de los Negros* the first independent settlement of the Continent.

As a result, Gaspar Yanga **became the first black ruler in America**.

The music will be written for chamber orchestra (including percussion, an early music band), actors, soloist singers and a choir. **YANGA** will feature a **contemporary score**, inspired by the rich and diverse musical sources of the time.



MUSIC  
GABRIELA ORTIZ

CONCEPT/REALIZATION  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER  
ALEJANDRO ESCUER

LIBRETTO  
SANTIAGO MARTÍN BERMÚDEZ

STAGE DIRECTOR  
MARIO ESPINOSA

HISTORIAN ADVISOR  
ANTONIO DÍAZ DE LEÓN

TEMBEMBÉ ENSAMBLE CONTINUO  
TAMBUCO PERCUSSION QUARTET  
CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

INTERNATIONAL ADVISORS AND  
HONORARY MEMBERS

SERGIO VELA  
JEFF VON DER SCHMIDT  
JAN KARLIN

## Background

*On the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the foundation of Veracruz, one of the States of Mexico, Multidisciplina Arte y Sociedad AC (MAS+) is presenting YANGA, a musical project that will blend contemporary classical concert music with influences from XVI Century Spanish early music, Son Jarocho, and African percussion styles.*

*When the Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico in 1519, he founded a city which he named Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, referring to the area's gold and dedicated to the "True Cross", because he landed on the Christian holy day of Good Friday, the day of the Crucifixion. It was the second Spanish settlement on the mainland of the Americas but the first to receive a coat-of-arms. During the colonial period, this city had the largest mercantile class and was at times wealthier than the capital of Mexico City. Veracruz has a blend of cultures, mostly indigenous ethnic Spanish and African. The influence of these three is best seen in the food and music and the arts of the area, which has strong Spanish, Caribbean and African influences. GABRIELA OTIZ (the composer) writes:*

I have decided to work with this theme because the life of Yanga's extraordinary vision and achievements regarding the invaluable struggle in our country to preserve basic human liberties (the first in the Continent) in order to make our sovereignty a reality. Gaspar Yanga not only achieved the freedom of black slaves brought from Africa, he also obtained permits so that the Spanish Crown would cede the region of what is today the town of Yanga (San Lorenzo de los Negros), near Córdoba, Veracruz. Thus, San Lorenzo de los Negros became in 1630 the first independent settlement of the Continent and in turn, Gaspar Yanga became the first black ruler of America.

With regards to the composition of this opera, it is fundamental to note that musical references allude to the era of Yanga as one of Spanish music from the 16th and 17th centuries, originating mostly in Andalucía and the Canary Islands. Said music takes on a very distinct character in Mexico upon blending with the African influences that developed in the Caribbean region at the time with the indigenous substrate that originally populated these lands, comprising what we know today as Son Jarocho, a musical genre I have empathized with ever since I was a young girl, thanks to trips to Tlacotalpan with my parents and the singer Salvador "el Negro" Ojeda.

Back in Spain, sevillanas, fandanguillos, bulerías, garrotines and peteneras were already the result of a fairly interesting blend of Arabian music with the gypsy tradition, Jewish melodies and Byzantine music. If we bring together the couplets, the strumming of lutes and guitars and the rhythmic stamping of feet, the antiphony, improvisation and use of wordplay and onomatopoeia, all elements originating in Africa, we can begin to imagine what musical heritage comprised what we currently know as son Jarocho in the territory of Veracruz.

While it is not my intention to explicitly emulate these genres, their roots provide me with inspiration and a starting point from which to attain an original musical language that dramatically represents the essence of that age. For the historical-musical research, I intend to contact and collaborate with various people who are experts on the subject, such as historian Antonio García de León, researcher Antonio Corona and the musicians Leopoldo Novoa and Eloy Cruz, members of the group Tembembe, who have been dedicated to the research and outreach of Hispanic Baroque music and traditional son from Mexico and Latin America.

By my way of thinking, the music in this opera should take the risk of assuming our poly-cultural condition and with it, the richness not only of our dual past (indigenous and European) but also the relatively unstudied roots of our African heritage. All this, parting from various technical resources, such as for example that of incorporating into the instrumental color a Baroque guitar, a jarana or a marimbula, not forgetting the undeniable influence of a musical and social movement with characteristics that are both local and universal, wholly accepting ourselves as artists inserted in our space, our context and our time.

Finally, I would like to point out that since the nature and virtue of this project arise from the conception and natural hybridization of various languages and artistic resources, its music should be developed under that same perspective, creating as a result one of the most eclectic and fascinating projects it is in my power to take on. Therefore, all those styles will be transformed through a sophisticated contemporary solid discourse that will favor and combine expressiveness, originality, a characteristic rhythmic drive and a constant search for color in such a way, they will only add to a new musical reinterpretation of the original sources for a XXI Century work.

The story of Yanga invites us to approach not only the issue of freedom vs. slavery, but also to confront the negotiation of a hostile environment within a freedom that is constrained, but not impossible. Moreover, the theme of blackness –that so-called third root of Mexican heritage– is still a relatively taboo subject for it has not been explored nor fully studied, a fact that will grant social as well as human an historical significance to the opera.

